

You First: Leadership for a New World

“Tipping Points—Tippy Times”

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

In this installment of his new column, Light deftly weaves together boiling frogs, libations, and our natural resistance to change, to discuss evolutionary and revolutionary tipping points. As he concludes, when contemplating an organizational change effort, keep in mind that “context is everything, and adapt your leadership style accordingly.”

WITH NEWS THAT CO₂ LEVELS IN April 2018 hit the highest average ever recorded,¹ I couldn’t help but think about the boiling frog video. It begins with a frog sitting in a pan of cold water. Suddenly, a scientist pours in boiling water. The frog jumps out. The scientist then repeats the experiment, only this time slowly heating the water up. The frog sits in the pan until the temperature reaches over two hundred degrees Fahrenheit. We don’t see what finally happens, but we can guess.

It turns out that the legend of the frog is just that: a legend. And, it is scientifically false.² But of course, a metaphor doesn’t have to be scientifically true to be useful, and authors of leadership articles and books regularly use the frog to explain effective organizational change.³

Now, no one declares, “Boil a frog!” to initiate a change effort; and change gurus like John Kotter use more politically correct phrases like *create a sense of urgency*. And this is important—in fact, Kotter makes it his first step in his eight-stage change model.⁴ Kotter lists nine ways to invoke a sense of urgency, including: *create a crisis* (allow a

financial loss, identify major weaknesses vis-à-vis competitors); *eliminate obvious examples of excess*; *insist that people talk regularly to unsatisfied customers*; and *bombard people with information on future opportunities*.⁵

Instead of urgency, the venerable Edgar Schein uses the term *unfreezing*, and offers three ways for creating the motivation to change. Using an example of a house on fire, here’s how to unfreeze the status quo: show people that the house is on fire (*disconfirmation and disequilibrium*); convince them that they may die (*creation of survival anxiety or guilt*); and offer them a way out (*creation of psychological safety to overcome learning anxiety*).⁶

And then there is the notion of the *tipping point*, a term popularized by Malcom Gladwell, who defines it as the “moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point.”⁷ The term carries a sense of immediacy, a definitive point in time. It is borrowed from epidemiologists, who use it to describe the point at which, for example, a run-of-the-mill cold outbreak in a classroom infects an entire school system and shuts it down. Think one domino causing fifteen thousand

others to crash.⁸ Some tipping points are manually constructed by creating a sense of urgency or unfreezing the status quo. A particularly powerful way to do this is to dismiss an executive following an organization’s sustained decline in performance.⁹

Other accelerants include two types of innovations. *Sustaining technologies*, as noted by Clayton Christensen and Michael Overdorf in the *Harvard Business Review*, are “innovations that make a product or service perform better in ways that customers in the mainstream market already value.”¹⁰ *Disruptive innovations* “create an entirely new market through the introduction of a new kind of product or service.”¹¹ Along these lines, whatever it is that makes the organization successful today will be the cause of its crisis tomorrow.¹²

Tipping points can also originate in the environment itself (hello, volcanoes), and are frequently out of the control of leaders. Sometimes very small things lead to tipping points. This is the essence of the butterfly effect—wherein, according to Kevin Kelly in *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization*, “a small alteration in the initial conditions can

amplify into wide-ranging effects throughout the rest of the system. . . . [like] the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Beijing triggering a hurricane in Florida.”¹³

Tipping points can be either intended or unintended, which is in keeping with Margaret Wheatley’s observation that there are “two sources of change: the traditional type that is initiated and managed; and external changes over which no one has control.”¹⁴

Tipping points aren’t alone in the wilderness; each one has a before and an after. There is the evolutionary variation, with its “prolonged periods of growth where no major upheaval occurs,” and there is the revolutionary variation, with its shorter periods of “substantial turmoil in organizational life.”¹⁵ Put differently, evolutionary change is of the 10 percent variety that “almost any organization can tolerate”; revolutionary change is its antithesis—short, major, and all-encompassing.¹⁶

If you’re thinking this is a brand-new change model, think again; it’s as old as time itself. Indeed, paleontologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould call it the *punctuated equilibrium* model.¹⁷ (See model illustrated below.)

Before you decide to enter the realm of tipping points, however, hear this loud and clear: *Most change efforts fail*. Kotter found, “A few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale.”¹⁸

Rosabeth Kanter acknowledges as much when she writes that “many companies are change-klutzes.”¹⁹ (Time for some rotgut.)

And hear this, too: Resisting change is hard-wired into our behavioral DNA. Research by Rolf Smith on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® finds that two out of three people broadly resist change, and half strongly resist; one out of six will be broadly receptive; and only 6 percent of people “will be *strongly receptive* to change and act as change agents.”²⁰

Here are six reasons why so many of us resist: the change is not necessary; it’s not feasible; it’s not cost effective; it would cause personal losses; it’s inconsistent with values; and the leaders of the change effort are not trusted.²¹ If you want to usher in revolutionary change, you had better have a darn good reason. (Sip a brandy and think it over.)

A few closing observations. First, if you’re doing pretty well—balancing the budget, growing revenues every year, mostly hitting your marks—your agency is likely in a period of evolution. It’s tempting to think that this would be the perfect time to go for a revolutionary change, but this will likely be an epic fail.²² (Instead, sit back, chill out, and pour yourself a Bordeaux; a tipping point will come in due time.)

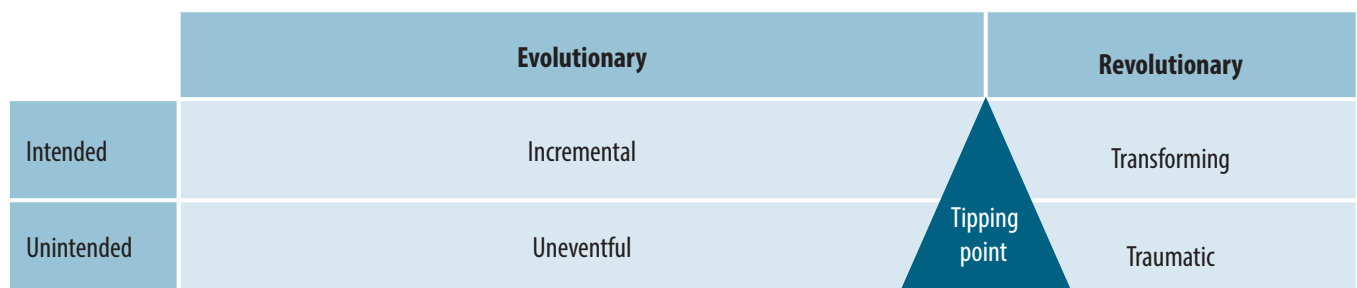
Second, if your predecessor was ousted because of your organization’s sustained declining performance, odds are you’re following a tipping point on

your way to revolutionary change, where you’re going to be tested. You’d better be willing to do the heavy lifting of leading change. (Don’t pour a Chardonnay; uncork the vodka.)

Third, understand that context is everything, and adapt your leadership style accordingly. As suggested in *The Great Plan of China* (circa between 1121 and 2200 BCE), “In peace and tranquility, correctness and straightforwardness (must sway); in violence and disorder, strong rule; in harmony and order, mild rule.”²³ (If you take this route, break out the brewskis and ask for a raise; you’ll deserve it.)

NOTES

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3. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Boston: Belknap Press, 1998); Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990); and Noel M. Tichy and Eli B. Cohen, *The Leadership Engine: How Winning Companies Build Leaders at Every Level*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperBusiness, 1997).
4. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, rev. ed.



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7. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, 1st ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 12–14.

8. Hevesh5, *The Amazing Triple Spiral (15,000 Dominoes)*, 2:27, September 10, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo6x4eulY9g.

9. Michael L. Tushman and Elaine Romanelli, “Organizational Evolution: A Metamorphosis Model of Convergence and Reorientation,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 7 (1985): 180.

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11. *Ibid.*

12. Larry E. Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow,” *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 3 (May-June, 1998): 58.

13. Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization* (Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 140.

14. Margaret Wheatley, “When Change Is Out of Our Control,” in *Human Resources in the 21st Century*, ed. Marc Effron, Robert Gandossy, and Marshall Goldsmith (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 187.

15. In earlier version of Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow,” 38; Larry E. Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow,” *Harvard Business Review* 50, no. 4 (July-August, 1972): 37–46.

16. Elaine Romanelli and Michael L. Tushman, “Organizational Transformation as Punctuated Equilibrium: An Empirical Test,” *Academy of Management Journal* 37, no. 5 (October 1994): 1141–66; Christensen and Overdorf, “Meeting the Challenge of Disruptive Change,” 66–76; and Michael L. Tushman, William H. Newman, and David

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17. Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, “Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism,” in Thomas J. M. Schopf, ed., *Models in Paleobiology* (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co., 1972), 82–115.

18. Kotter, *Leading Change*, 1.

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22. Greiner, “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow”; Peter M. Senge, *The Dance of Change: The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1999).

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